

Sunday 29th November. First Sunday of Advent. 10.30am Healing service.

What a great way to start Advent with a prayer from Isaiah that reads..... 'Oh that you would open the heavens and descend.'

The promise of the coming of Jesus hundreds of years before he came as a baby.

Even though we know Jesus has come, and is with us, by his Holy Spirit, that cry - 'O that you would open the heavens and come down' resounds in our hearts even today, as we enter Advent.

There is always a yearning for more...more Lord, more of your power here on earth; more of your saving power - as we long for others to come to know Jesus; more of your transforming power - as we long to see change in ourselves and in our community, in our society and in our world. More of heaven coming down....

At the start of this pandemic, I had a real sense that God would indeed open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there wouldn't be enough space to store it. An image from the book of Malachi.

Since then, there seems to have been storm after storm. Plans made; plans cancelled. People have become unwell, there has been so much suffering. It can be so easy to become overwhelmed by the storms of life.

This passage from Isaiah is a prayer, a cry from the heart – come down Lord, we need your help...And I really think that's a cry for us today..

So, let's take a look at our passage. Firstly, a bit of historical background. Some of the Israelites who were enslaved in Babylon were beginning to return to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was still in ruins, nothing had been rebuilt at this point, the Persians were still very much in control. Plus, there was wrangling going on between those who had been left behind and those who were returning.

So, we begin this passage with that cry from Isaiah. 'Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down. '

Isaiah here is yearning for past times to return; he looks back and remembers those special times when God came in power. He remembers the stories of old and longs for a new outpouring from God. The imagery we read about here in Isaiah, of heaven opening, mountains trembling, and fire - was a traditional motif for the coming of the Holy One.

As Moses was about to go up the mountain to receive the 10 commandments ... Hear what was written in Exodus 19: 16-18

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. 17 Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire.

The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

At the dedication of the first temple, the grand temple of Solomon, the glory of the Lord fell, We read in 2 Chronicles 7:1-3

When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. 2 The priests could not enter the temple of the Lord because the glory of the Lord filled it. 3 When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the Lord above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshipped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, 'He is good; his love endures for ever.'

The presence of God meant everything to Isaiah, and had been everything to the Israelites, but somehow, they seemed to have lost it. God's glory was not seen. It was as if God was on mute. Being in exile and with the destruction of the temple - it was as if God was no longer present with them....and Isaiah was crying out for the people....crying out to God to reveal himself in glory again.

Do you know the power of God's presence with you today, or do you feel, perhaps, like God is on mute? Or maybe somewhere in the middle?

But was God really **not** with the Israelites in exile? Had God really withdrawn from them? If we read on in Isaiah, it suggests that for the Israelites, it wasn't that God was no longer present –it was more that the people had forgotten who he was.

In verse 4 it says God had not been talked about – *no one has heard and no ear perceived*. God had not been looked for – it says *no eye has seen*. And verse 7 it says they'd stopped praying – '*no one calls on your name*'.

They had forgotten God and not the other way round...They weren't following his ways, anymore. They weren't waiting expectantly for God.

And what happens if we forget about God, if we don't seek him regularly, if we don't read his word or worship or pray to him...? We fall away, we grow cold, but worse than that, we no longer do things God's ways but go our own way.

When we stop saying 'Thy kingdom come' ...we stop asking for 'Thy will to be done' ... They are inextricably linked. The more we seek God the more we find him. When God doesn't seem to act, maybe we need to look at where we are with Him.

Isaiah puts it these terms in verse 5: They sinned against God, that they had all become like filthy rags and dried up and not looking to the Lord. Sin is just turning away from the Lord, away from following his plan, which in turn causes harm to ourselves and to others. The Israelites had turned away to such an extent that Isaiah wondered.

How could a holy God live among such sinful people at all? How then could they be saved?

Isaiah prays that the Israelites would turn away from their sins by remembering God – you see they weren't even thinking about God at all – they did not see him either as a vengeful God or a saving God – it was as if he were no longer relevant to their lives. It's very hard to see God when you're looking in the other direction.

Now you, wonderful people, you who are listening this morning or reading this sermon, you are seeking God, wanting to know more about this God we worship.

Verse 5 reassures us that the Lord *'comes to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways.'*

But there are many who, like the Israelites, do not seek God, are not even thinking about the possibility of there being a God, or have decided that God is boring, untrue and irrelevant.

We need to refill ourselves with the truth and reimage our understanding of God, so that others may see that he is indeed exciting, he is true, and he is relevant to our everyday lives, today.

And fortunately, Isaiah helps us by reminding us of two most profound things about God.

Firstly – he says in verse 8 *'yet you Lord are our Father'*

Isaiah knew God, he knew God as Father. A loving heavenly Father, who was not on mute, he was always there, always loving, always good and always longing for his people to come back to him. Those who know God, through Jesus, **have** a loving heavenly father.

Whatever our experience of an earthly father – God is always there for us, always loving, always good and always longing for us to be with him.

There's a fairly modern worship song called 'Good, Good Father', which you may like to have a listen to – just search 'Good Good Father' on YouTube. It goes like this

I've heard a thousand stories
Of what they think You're like
But I've heard the tender whisper
Of love in the dead of night
You tell me that You're pleased
And that I'm never alone

You're a Good Good Father
It's who You are
And I'm loved by You
It's who I am

For those who know Jesus, we have a good, good father who loves us.
For those who don't know Jesus – well they're missing out on knowing God as Father, God as their rock, their source of love and hope. Let's share the Good news of God as father.

The second profound statement Isaiah makes about God is that

We are the clay, you are the potter.

This imagery of God as the Potter that gently moulds is seen throughout scripture. Right back at the beginning in Genesis 2:7 God formed man out of the dust of the ground.

God physically shaped Adam from the clay of the earth and breathed life into him.

In the book of Jeremiah, 18:1-6 says

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So, I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.

An image of God remodelling the clay.

That imagery extends into the New Testament where the Apostle Paul refers to our bodies as being jars of clay in 2 Corinthians 4:7

⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

But let's just spend a moment thinking what it means that we are clay in the hands of the Potter. Let me suggest a couple of ideas...

Firstly, it acknowledges God's handiwork as the master Potter and creator of our physical body. We were made by God. We are not just a random chance event. As it says in Psalm 139 *'For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. God made you and he delights in you.*

Secondly, it recognises that God has the power to mould us. More than that, we have a God who wants to mould us. He doesn't want to leave us as a lump of clay, but his love for us, means that he wants to mould us into his divine image and likeness. As Paul says, We are being transformed from glory to glory. He wants to mould us into the person he always intended us to be - slowly, surely and yes sometimes painfully, but he takes our fallenness and, our imperfections and transforms each and every part of us, he moulds us, he shapes us, he breathes new life into us.

And he wants to mould our minds, our hearts, and our bodies

He wants to mould our **minds**, so we think differently about things. Our minds moulded to see things, as if through the eyes of Jesus. When we are hurt by someone – we actively choose to turn the other cheek. When someone upsets us – we choose to forgive them rather than take revenge We actively seek out injustice and consider what we can do. We actively look for the poor and marginalised and think how to help. Like Jesus, We actively seek the Father' will.

And He wants to mould our **hearts** - to soften us and make us more compassionate. To help us stop judging others and spend more time listening instead. To help us put the concerns of others before our own. God moulds our hard hearts into hearts that are loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled.

And He wants to mould our **bodies** – to rid us of the imperfections that hold us back. God is a healing God, he longs to heal us in body, mind and spirit. And we come to him today for his healing touch. We come to the master potter and ask for the imperfections to be removed and our bodies remoulded.

So, we have a God who longs to mould us, if we let him. And he ultimately moulds us into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. You see God is the ultimate potter - As God moulded the divine self on Christmas Day – God himself became clay.

This is our God: A God who is our Father, a personal God who loves each one of us so much he made himself clay; clay that was beaten and broken for us. But the father didn't leave him broken, he powerfully remodelled him, resurrected him, moulded a resurrection body out of the clay so we have a perfect human seated next to the Father in heaven. This is our God who loves us unconditionally; a God who can transform us and through us and with us and in us can transform communities, societies and heal the world. This is our God.

One obvious reality check.....clearly we are not yet the finished article...

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were completely perfect now; if we could stop the battling, stop battling with bad thoughts and actions, stop battling with hard hearts, stop battling with illness and suffering.

But this moulding takes time,

As Paul tells us we are have our treasure – we have the Good News living in us- we have this treasure in jars of clay. Imperfect, battered jars of clay. These broken bodies of ours need moulding daily – daily we need to come to God and repent and open ourselves up to his remodelling. Father mould our minds, mould our hearts, mould our bodies.

Why do we need to ask God daily? So that we know that any good that we do, comes from God – and God gets the glory, not us. That this extraordinary power that we have in us, this power that transforms us, heals relationships, heals bodies, mends societies, that power belongs to God and does not come from us .

So, the real lesson of this passage is for us to stop battling. Yes, we can actually stop battling This word from Isaiah asks us to surrender. Surrender to the master potter. To stop fighting. Stop fighting to be good or better. Stop worrying about being more righteous or enlightened. Stop thinking we alone can make Christmas special or save the world

Let's use this Advent season to spend time with God, to get to know him as our Father, to thank him for all he has done for us through Jesus. Ask God to look upon us as we pray and allow him to mould us... as we cry out to God

'Would you open the heavens and descend'. Come fill us with your Holy Spirit, Come have your way with us today. And let's wait and listen and watch. Take time in all the busyness to step back and see what God is doing in us, in our community, in our country and in our world.

Your kingdom come, your will be done. In the name of Jesus. Amen.